



Lisa Wilson



A slice of bone



The Trico

Q&A/

Mark Poloncarz: The view from the 16th floor

BY MARIA SCRIVANI

The most compelling piece of the Mark Poloncarz narrative may be his sheer ordinariness. Listen to him and you hear a mixture of bluntness and guileless boosterism. For a successful politician, he is disarmingly without pretense. By all accounts, Poloncarz remains true to his working-class roots. One of three sons born to parents who labored at Bethlehem Steel and Mercy Hospital, he was educated in the Lackawanna public school system. From a young age, he found politics interesting, and was drawn to the shining ideals of old-fashioned good government. While he never imagined sitting behind the county executive's desk on the sixteenth floor of the Rath Building, surrounded by sweeping views of the waterfront and City Hall, he looks right at home here.

And if the task before him—growing jobs, restoring county services, and not raising taxes—is a daunting balancing act, Poloncarz appears to be quite the agile acrobat.

How come everyone around you looks a bit frantic, and you seem pretty well-rested?

I'm the most relaxed of the new people here. As [the former] comptroller, I knew the current status of Erie County government, and what we had to provide. It's like a CFO moving to the CEO position—that happens a lot in the business world. I am not going to say I know everything, but I have a pretty good grasp on what we have to deal with. I saw a whole lot in six years as comptroller, and it set me up well to step in as executive.

Is the word "downsizing" in your lexicon—or should we say you are "rightsizing" county government?

I think "refining" is the word. We are using the resources we have, making government more efficient, trying to provide services as effectively as we can without compromising. We are as lean as we are ever going to get. When Alfreda Slominski, the gold standard of fiscal oversight around here, left the office of county comptroller, there were sixty-five to seventy employees in that office. When I left, we had thirty-two. So the size of government has been reduced. Cuts to the bone have happened, and, recently, cuts through the bone. Some of the Collins cuts were draconian, and not based on sound public policy. In some areas, he was overspending, and

that is where we have made adjustments.

Many folks checked the Poloncars box at their polling places last November because you vowed to restore funding to cultural institutions whose budgets had been slashed by your predecessor. Can we assume you are an arts lover?

I've attended plays, been to museums and galleries, and I have had season tickets to Shea's and the Kavinoky. I've seen Irish Classical productions, and I have a Buffalo Zoo membership. I've done a lot of traveling, and, based on our size, we should not have the assets we have. I disagree with those who say government should not give a penny to the arts. And I am also committed to keeping the Buffalo Bills here. There is a balance that needs to exist. Of course, wants and needs are not the same. The county needs to provide certain services to ensure a healthy environment. We do not need to fully fund all the cultural, but we do need to provide some assistance. People are greedy: they want all the services they can get without paying for them. The difficulty is how to provide for them without increasing revenues—and I have no intention of increasing taxes.

So what are your intentions?

Our number one priority is job growth. The governor's plan for regional economic development will work; we need to work together in one setting. As comptroller, I developed relationships with town and city officials. I know many of the supervisors, council members and town clerks. I am not introducing myself for the first time at every meeting. My question is always, "What role can the county play?" The City of Buffalo has had some issues for a long time; we all know that. But

you cannot have a weak urban core and expect the county to survive. We as a community have to work together to solve problems. Sometimes, there are just too many cooks in the kitchen, all working with different recipes, some of them recipes for disaster. My vision is, even if we have a lot of cooks, we are all working off the same recipe.

Sounds delicious, especially when you've been on a starvation diet for years. But okay, let's indulge in a fantasy. Say you were handed a magic wand—what one thing would you fix immediately?

Can I fix two things? First, we should not have multiple industrial development agencies. There should

Poloncarz on music and muses

You clearly support the arts. Any personal involvement in them?

I've played guitar since I was a kid. And I was taking piano lessons until recently. Had to

stop during the campaign—there just wasn't enough time.

Who are your heroes?

I have always admired Robert Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt,

and Teddy Roosevelt. These were leaders who came through some very difficult times. Yet they always focused on the social needs of those who had nothing.

be a one-stop shop. Secondly, I would change the self-defeatist attitude in this community. Okay, so the UB campus should have been built downtown, but it's not there. So now we have the positive development of UB's involvement in the medical campus downtown. We are one united community, and we

need to focus on jobs. I want to work with our friends to the west and north of here. I can see Canada from my office window; we are only ninety minutes from Toronto, the financial center of the United States' number one trading partner. Why can't we get some Canadian companies bringing business here? I think we are on the cusp of something huge here, with the governor's one-billion challenge grant, and the Say Yes to Education program planned for Buffalo. At this time last year,

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz



Photo by KC Kraut

I don't think any one of us could have dreamed we would have these opportunities. And to paraphrase Marv Levy, "There is no place I would rather be than right here, right now."

And where would you like to be headed four years from now?

I am just focusing on this term. I am hopeful that we will be able to serve this community for a long time, but the privilege I am enjoying right now is this four-year term. I remind folks that we don't represent taxpayers or voters—we represent citizens, from the youngest to the oldest. This is a public trust for generations to come, so we should not, for example, let the parks fall into disrepair. I was always interested in politics in my school days, and saw a goodness in government when it's done correctly. At the end of the day, people should be proud of their community and their government. I am going to try to make that happen.

Maria Scrivani is a Buffalo resident with an interest in local history and people who make a difference.

